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SUBJECT: NINEWA: PUK NATIONAL ASSEMBLYMEMBER CONFIDENT IMPASSE OVER
GOVERNMENT FORMATION WILL BE SOLVED SOON

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CLASSIFIED BY: Cameron Munter, PRT Leader, Provincial
Reconstruction Team Ninewa, State.
REASON: 1.4 (a), (b), (d)

SUMMARY

11. (C) PUK national assemblymember from Ninewa Abdelbari Al Zebari is an optimist. On a recent visit to Turkey with PUK colleagues for talks with members of the Turkish parliament, the delegation was told -- repeatedly -- that the Iraqis should "get accustomed" to the idea of working with the Turks, since the U.S. was leaving soon. But such sentiments from long-time Turkish adversaries cannot sway his belief that the USG will always stand by Iraq, claims Zebari. He views the current impasse over government formation in Baghdad as a positive event, one that will humble the Shia coalition and remind them that they are not the only political group with power in the country. He says cracks are visible in the Shia coalition and that the day is near when Prime Minister Ibrahim Al Ja'afari will withdraw his candidacy, freeing up the Shia nomination to better suited candidates such as Abdul Al Mahdi of SCIRI. If not, then the Shia coalition -- or whatever is left of it -- will find life very difficult, as secular parties, Sunni Arabs, and the Kurds are likely to work together. Zebari is looking forward to provincial elections in Ninewa sometime later this year. Although he expects the Kurds to lose seats in the provincial council, he believes more qualified candidates will come forward. The government's problems so far have been the fault of its weak leadership, he says. Efforts with the KRG are progressing well, claims Zebari, and both the KDP and PUK are working to battle corruption to attract investors from in and outside of Iraq. End Summary.

12. (SBU) PRT PolOff met with Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) national assemblymember Abdelbari Al Zebari, and public affairs officers Sheikh Mahmood and Sheikh Moyadeen at PUK Guesthouse in Mosul on April 12.

PUK VISIT TO TURKEY

13. (C) Zebari just returned from a visit to Turkey with a

delegation from the PUK. He said they met with the major political groups in the country, but not with any Turkish Kurd parties. He said the delegation spoke to Necati Cetinkaya, Member of Parliament from the AK Parti (Justice and Peace Party), as well as with former Turkish Ambassador to NATO and Member of Parliament Onur Oymen. Zebari said the talks were very adversarial. He said all the Turkish officials they met with, regardless of political affiliation, were singing a chorus of "The USG is going to leave soon and you'll have to play with us. So, you better get used to it." Zebari said he met with future Turkish Consul General to Mosul, Avni Botsali. Zebari said he recommended to Botsali not move too quickly as the security situation in Mosul was not stable. Plus, the location of the former consulate was very unsafe as it was bordered on either direction by major roads--ripe for mortaring, he said. Zebari claimed Botsali told him the Turks were now relying on the GOI and Ninewa provincial government to help locate a permanent site for the consulate. Botsali planned to return to Mosul in four to six weeks, he said. Without saying so directly, Zebari believed that Botsali was hoping/impling the USG would allow the Turks to operate off of a U.S. military base in Mosul until they got settled. [NOTE: U.S. forces cannot offer such support to the Turks because of base relocations].

CENTRAL GOVERNMENT FORMATION

¶4. (C) Zebari, ever optimistic, was certain that the new government formation talks would prove fruitful. The parliamentarians were slated to begin sessions this coming Monday, April 17. He believed Shia coalition prime minister nominee Ibrahim Al Ja'afari would step aside, or be forced to do so because of rumors of a "crack" in the coalition. As a result Abdul Al Mahdi of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution of Iraq (SCIRI) would most likely replace Ja'afari as the coalition's nominee. Grand Ayatollah Sistani even said in the press that the coalition was cracking, said Zebari. Scientist

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Hussein Sharastani, a technocrat, was a long shot, although Zebari still felt he was the best candidate on the Shia side. If Ja'afari didn't step aside then the Kurds would align with whoever broke away from the Shia coalition, as well as with secular and Sunni Arab coalitions. Zebari claimed that gruff political tactics by Iraqi President Jalal Talabani had upset many people, but someone had to step up to lead the country since Ja'afari was not. If Ja'afari stepped aside, claimed Zebari, the new government could be formed in a matter of weeks.

The Kurd coalition hoped to retain the presidency, even if another Kurd replaced Talabani, he said. The PUK would hold such a position if all worked out well, since that was what both the PUK and Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) had agreed upon.

PROVINCIAL POLITICS

¶5. (C) Zebari remained hopeful that provincial elections would occur sometime later this year. The new government had to be formed and the new election laws written, he said. Ninewa's current provincial administration, while predominantly Kurdish, was failing the people, claimed Zebari. He said its problems were the fault of the personalities on the provincial council, but most importantly because of weak leaders like Vice Governor Khasro Goran. He said he was ashamed of the poor job the provincial government was doing. Although any new election would ultimately result in the Kurds losing seats, Zebari said he hoped it would be more responsive to the people of Ninewa. The last provincial election in January 2005 occurred too soon, he said, and truly qualified candidates were afraid to run for office given that the city just fell to terrorists two months earlier. Zebari hoped that better and more qualified candidates would come forward. Perhaps, then the province would move in the right direction. The economy was doing poorly and that contributed to security problems. Investment was needed but it

was a two-way street, since no one would invest if the security continued at the same level or worsened over time, he said. Zebari claimed the farming sector in Ninewa could not be allowed to fail, since that was the bread and butter of the province, or Ninewa would be lost.

KURDISH ISSUES

16. (C) Relations with the KDP were improving and the two parties had been working better together, especially with addressing problems of corruption in Iraqi Kurdistan. Both parties had agreed to form commissions to investigate corruption and to submit reports on how to battle and correct it, he said. The importance of the issue was not lost on either side since the goal was to lure investors, especially foreign, Zebari said. Regardless, there were many things to be proud of in Iraqi Kurdistan. Construction of the new American University in Sulaymaniyah was progressing well, and safety had been improving. Relations with the Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU) was getting better, now that they realized they needed to work together as Kurds, he said. KIU recently rejoined the Kurd coalition in the national assembly in Baghdad, and had also done so in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Although there had not been an official announcement, Zebari believed KIU's move was a step in the right direction. Otherwise, people would continue to associate the party with the Sunni Arab-dominated Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP), thereby forcing Kurds to choose between their allegiances as Kurds and Islamic beliefs, he said. With regards to Iraqi central government formation in Baghdad, however, KIU was being unreasonable, he claimed, because they were requesting three ministerial positions when they only won five seats. This was something unlikely to happen since the two larger parties, PUK and KDP, were already anticipating a difficult road ahead with securing their own minister positions.

COMMENT

17. (C) Ever the optimist, Zebari's words on the future of Iraq, Ninewa, and Iraqi Kurdistan are always encouraging. He believes the current impasse over the formation of the central government is a positive test of democracy in Iraq because it is preventing the Shia coalition from forcing its selection of Ja'afari on the other political parties. Zebari says he believes it will make the Shia coalition more humble in its dealings with other

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parties, especially with regards to cabinet and ministerial selection. In short, democracy in Iraq is working, claims Zebari.
MUNTER